AGRICULTURE AND RURAL LIFE
DOCUMENTING CHANGE

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ISSUES

Cover: ***Aerial View: Fields***
Photograph by Frank Gohlke, 1983
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AGRICULTURE AND RURAL LIFE: DOCUMENTING CHANGE

Introduction

John Kolb and Edmund Brunner began their 1950s textbook on rural sociology with the dual question: "What is Rural Society—Why Study It?" The textbook defines rural society in objective terms by following the U.S. Census definition (at the time, roughly anyone not living in a city or unincorporated area of 2500 or more residents). What should be studied about rural society, said Kolb and Brunner, were 25 topics, ranging from the "psychological characteristics of rural people," to "the social function of land," from "rural interest groups and classes," to "rural recreation and the cultural arts" and "local government—a social institution." Why study all this? "It supplies a knowledge of the importance of rural America in the national life…and of rural-urban-relationships. It shows the importance of social forces, groups, and organizations and the parts they play in national and community life."[1] After roughly 50 years of farm crises, the depopulation of rural areas, and national debate over the fate of "the rural way of life," the importance of understanding rural society probably does not need much further elaboration.[2]

The study of agriculture and rural life is important, especially in areas where both have significant impact on economic and social structures. What Kolb and Brunner did not ask about rural society is the question "How Can It Be Studied?" A sampling of monographs on 20th century rural society in the United States,[3] published between 1930 and 1990, suggest a broad and highly inconsistent base of sources. The most frequently cited sources are government reports and statistics, followed by scholarly monographs and journal articles, followed by newspaper articles (one author ranks the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal as the best sources for information on agriculture, along with the Des Moines Register, while most authors rely on the papers of the locality being studied).

Beyond these published sources, authors used field notes (personal observations of and conversations with members of rural society), local government records (probate, register of deeds, civil court, marriage), local bank records, Dunn & Bradstreet credit reports, plat maps, reminiscences, and the usual surmise, speculation, and extrapolation. Interestingly, in only one of these studies were traditional archives and manuscripts collections mentioned or used, and that study (which used local government records and bank records) was of rural social organization in Alberta, Canada. Nor were any formal oral histories cited.

A 1991 study by an intern at the Minnesota Historical Society reviewed articles in state historical journals and mainstream economic and American history journals, looking for articles on agriculture and rural life and then noting the sources used. The study's conclusions were that, first, these journals devoted relatively little attention to the topic of rural society (between 1% and 20% of the articles published) and, second, the sources used for these articles were divided roughly equally between government reports/data and manuscript material. However, a more focused analysis of the call slips at the Minnesota Historical Society, conducted for the same study, indicated that only 4% of researcher requests for government records and manuscript collections were for material

documenting agriculture or rural life.[4] It is clear that any dearth of use of or citations to archives, manuscripts, and oral history sources is not due to any dearth of those sources.[5]

We are confronted, then, with a paradox. Agriculture and rural society are the subjects of entire disciplines (agricultural science, rural sociology) and are the focus of much media attention, but the bread and butter primary sources that archives rely on for documentation of rural life seem to be relatively unused.

The Project

Faced with these realities, and with the fact that agriculture and rural life are of critical importance to both states, the Minnesota and North Dakota state historical records advisory boards elected to undertake a project that would attempt to define the issues and better understand the context. The specifics of project operations are covered in a separate publication, *Agriculture and Rural Life: Documenting Change. Final Report.* That report details project objectives, reviews meetings held, constituencies consulted, and information gained, and includes an extensive, annotated bibliography of publications and websites related to the topic.

Perspectives

Beyond the report of project work, however, project staff and advisors saw the need to present a series of perspectives on the vast and unwieldy set of issues involved in documenting change in agriculture and rural life today. Thus this publication and its presentation of four views of the issues and realities involved.

In the first essay, *Rethinking Rural America,* David Danbom takes a thoughtful look at the definitions of what is rural in the America of the twenty first century. He reflects on the popular perceptions of rural life, its continuing attraction to many Americans, and the stark realities that often overtake those who attempt to meld urban and rural elements in their work and personal lives. Danbom provides a valuable set of considerations for those who would document agriculture and rural life – challenging the very perceptions upon which the documentation is built.

Robert Horton takes quite a different view, looking at the issues involved in documenting changes in agriculture and rural life from the perspective of the archivists who must decide upon a course of action. Reviewing the project's conception and the goals of its sponsors, he comments on the realities facing archivists as they attempt to understand the issues, their constituencies, and design realistic programs that serve a variety of needs.

The real world of farming and rural life is addressed in a series of reflections in the essay by Dean Carlson. A farmer in northwestern Minnesota, Carlson is an insightful chronicler of the world around him. Author of the book *So This is Farming*, Carlson reflects on the events of daily life that form the context for his own view of agriculture and life in the countryside. His view-from-the-land provides a critical perspective on the lives and work of the very people who are the subjects of the project.

The Red River of the North flows north from its source on the borders of Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota and empties into Lake Winnipeg. Changes in agriculture and rural life in the Red River basin are thus international in scope, for the

farming regions of Manitoba are an integral part of the area. Michael Moosberger lends a Canadian perspective in his essay, reviewing the development of documentary projects at the University of Manitoba. Moosberger directed the archives at the university for more than a decade. The Canadian experience provides an excellent case study as he chronicles the development of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience. It is exactly that experience from which readers will learn what worked, what didn't, and draw lessons from Moosberger's account of this ambitious program.

Dealing With the Present; Preparing for the Future

This volume thus presents a range of perspectives on the issues that surround any attempt to document the evolution of agriculture and rural life. The authors occupy a variety of vantage points as they review the challenge and the promise involved in such an undertaking. Taken together their essays provide a direct connection to the realities that confront everyone involved in this important work.

Endnotes

[1] Kolb, John H. and Edmund de S. Brunner, *A Study of Rural Society* (1971 reprint of 1952 4th edition), pp. 1, 6. They argue that the importance of "the study of rural society" was virtually unrecognized before 1908, when Theodore Roosevelt appointed the Country Life Commission, because prior to that date it was assumed that "rural society" and "American society" were one and the same. While one could certainly argue about the beginning of concern about rural society (Thomas Jefferson and Edmund Ruffin having been worried 100 and 50 years, respectively, before Teddy Roosevelt), it is certainly true that formal scholarly study of rural society—as distinct from the agricultural economy—began in earnest early in the 20th century. Rural sociology monographs begin to appear early in the 1920s.

[2] What might need some elaboration is the fact that, despite popular perception that there was a renaissance of rural America between the Depression and the mid-1970s, the demographic trends were consistent throughout the latter half of the 20th Century. See, for example, Lee Taylor, *Changing Goodhue County [Minnesota], 1946-58* (1959), which notes that during the decade school districts declined from 155 to 16 (p. 9), the number of churches declined by 18% (p. 10), the number of farms declined by 10% (p.6), the number of farm laborers declined 43% (p.4), and the rural non-farm population increased 29% (p.3).

[3] In addition to those already cited, the publications sampled were: Conference on Problems of the Small City and Town, *The Small City and Town: A Conference on Community Relations* (1930); Jean Burnet, *Next-year Country: A Study of Rural Social Organization in Alberta* (1951); Paul Folsom, *Rural Ministry: A response to Change* (1976); John Shover, *First Majority, Last Minority: The Transforming of Rural Life in America* (1976); Gilbert Fite, *American Farmers: The New Minority* (1981); Harley Johansen, *The Changing Rural Village in America: Demographic and Economic Trends since 1950* (1984); Mark Friedberger, *Farm Families and Change in Twentieth-Century America* (1988); Joseph Amato, *The Decline of Rural Minnesota* (1993).

[4] Mark Shelstad, "Documenting Agricultural Resources: Strategies, Problems, and Shortfalls," unpublished paper (1991), pp. 20-21. The call slips were studied for the years 1986 and 1988—45 of 1102 requests during those years were for material documenting rural society.

[5] For instance, the agriculture/rural life manuscripts holdings of MHS (including agri-business) equal roughly 20% of the total manuscripts. The intern's study at MHS used published guides, regional OPACs, RLIN, and direct correspondence to survey holdings related to rural society at all Minnesota university campuses and at thirteen major repositories in California, Illinois, Iowa, North and South Dakota, New

York, and Wisconsin. To be sure, manuscript holdings at most repositories are relatively thin for the last quarter of this century, and some clear topical gaps can be identified (for example, records of family and corporate "mega-farms," records of ancillary agri-businesses such as chemical and fuel suppliers and financial institutions). But it is unclear whether filling those gaps—or collecting other unpublished sources (both governmental and private) will result in a better understanding of rural society or simply in crowded archival shelves—see below.

RETHINKING RURAL AMERICA

David Danbom

Perhaps the first thing we have to think about in regard to "rural America" is just exactly what rural is. The Census defines rural people as people living in the open country or in incorporated places with population under 2500. That seems pretty clear-cut, but in fact it covers numerous conditions. Many "rural" people are in fact suburbanites, living in developments near major cities. Others live in the vast and decreasingly inhabited Intermountain West or the western Great Plains, many miles from the nearest town or even the nearest neighbor. They're all rural to the Census, but their experiences, institutions, and communities are as different as night and day. That's why believe we need to think about rurality in terms of experiences and expectations rather than in terms of population in a place of residence. We need to know what makes a place rural, rather than how many (or how few) people make it rural.

Of course, in our minds "rural America" is far simpler. When most of us hear those words the image that comes most readily to our minds is of a farmer, and of a particular kind of farmer. The farmer we conceive is inevitably a male, even though women can and do farm. Our farmer is seen in the mind's eye in the barn or with the hogs—seldom in the air-conditioned cab of a $200,000 tractor or in front of a computer. Our imagined farmer is a commercial producer, working his own land. He is never a tenant, or a migrant laborer, a hired hand, or an absentee landowner. And he is always Midwestern. California orchardists and Massachusetts cranberry-bog owners and Carolina tobacco growers all farm, but they do not come to our minds when we think of farmers.

The problem is that reality increasingly diverges from our image of rural America. At one time, virtually all rural Americans farmed, even if they gained much of their living from some other enterprise such as lumbering or mining or retail commerce. As late as the end of World War II over half of rural Americans still lived on farms. But today barely seven percent of rural people live on farms, and the percentage of the entire population that farms is so tiny that the Census Bureau has discussed ceasing to count farm dwellers as a distinct segment of the population. As I suggested in Born in the Country in 1995, even in rural America farmers have gone from majority, to minority, to curiosity.

Further complicating our mental image is the fact that only a relative handful even of those who farm conform to our traditional notions of what a farmer is. Most farm income in the United States today comes from off-farm sources, even in North Dakota and other states that have a strong commercial agricultural tradition. What this means is that many of our "farmers" are actually truck drivers and factory workers and school teachers and nurses who farm. Increasingly, the "farm" defines a place of residence rather than a principal occupation or source of income.

The "farmers" we think about and who appear on the evening news whenever there is a drought or prices are low—commercial producers who support themselves and their families from the profits of their farms—represent a small percentage even of the miniscule share rural people in agriculture. Of the fewer than two million farms in the United States today, fully half are "weekend" or "hobby" operations producing less than

$10,000 worth of saleable produce per year. Of those that produce more than that, only about 250,000 generate an annual income of $50,000 or more. In a country with a population approaching 300 million, that is an infinitesimal demographic group.

So how is it that such a tiny group has so much visibility, while the vast bulk of rural people are invisible to us? Part of it has to do with simplicity. Rural America is so complex and complicated that it is simply easier to make commercial farmers our representatives for the entire experience. Another part of it has to do with class and our perceptions of class. In the United States, where four of every five of us regularly identify ourselves as "middle class," we aren't comfortable thinking about class. Commercial farmers strike us as prototypical middle-class Americans-—self-supporting property owners who are comfortable, perhaps, but not rich. We conveniently ignore the sharp and genuine class distinctions in agriculture when we ignore migrant laborers, hired men, tenants, sharecroppers, and miner-farmers or truck-driver-farmers. Agriculture is modern America's field of dreams, on which we project our rural ideals and even our American ideals, whether they truly fit or not.

But there are other reasons, as well, why commercial farmers represent rural America to us. There is, for one thing, a residue of Thomas Jefferson's romantic conception of farmers as "nature's noblemen," people who are special and perhaps superior because of what they do and where they do it. It is also the case that commercial farmers are more visible than other rural people. They make claims on the public and demand public sympathy, and politicians pay more attention to them than to other rural people. They also have clout in their communities with county commissions, school boards, and other units of local government.

For all of these reasons we turn to commercial agriculture first when we think about collecting sources on rural America. But there are other reasons. One big one is that there is a wealth of documentation on commercial agriculture. There are farm newspapers and county fair records, legal documents generated by land transfers and probate, and farm financial records and diaries. Farm organizations and cooperatives generate organizational records that allow us to learn more about commercial producers. And the intense and sustained involvement of government with commercial agriculture, especially since creation of the extension service in *1914,* has generated mountains of paper. The other big reason why we think of commercial agriculture first when we plan our collections on rural America is that we know why the farmers are there. They are there at least in part to make a living, and that is something we understand and with which we are comfortable. We don't know why the other rural Americans are there.

We used to know, or at least have a good idea. They were there to run farm service businesses or retail goods to farm families. Or they were there because there were sections of railroad to maintain or trees to cut or seams of coal to mine. But as we have moved away from a resource-based economy over the past half century, all of that has changed. Increasingly, rural people do the same things urban people do. They work in front of computer screens or they commute to local centers where they work in service or retail or manufacturing occupations just like urban people do. In Cass County, North Dakota, where I live there are fewer farmers every year, but the farmsteads are occupied. The residents mostly work in Fargo-Moorhead, as do the citizens of towns like Casselton, one-time farm service centers that have become bedroom suburbs.

Not only do many rural people, on farms and off, pursue urban occupations, they

also live urban lives. Their houses look like the houses in town, they drive the same sorts of vehicles as urban people, they eat the same processed foods, wear the same clothing from the same stores, and are part of the same urban-defined national culture. Just as technology has diminished the physical distance between urban and rural America, so too have the cultural differences been eroded to the point that in the cases of many people they are faint and trivial when they exist at all.

Perhaps that's why rural living is attractive to many people, and why rural areas within commuting distance and urban centers are thriving. Today, rural people can enjoy all of the urban comforts in a non-urban environment and avoid the physical inconveniences and cramped parochialism that characterized much of rural America for most of our history.

I say "perhaps" because, as I implied earlier, we really don't know what attracts people to rural America, and until we do it will be difficult to know what sources we need to collect to tell the rural story. If rural people are just urban people with urban jobs and attitudes who have decided to live out of town, then there may not be a story here to tell, or if there is a story to be told maybe it could be better told through urban cultural and economic sources. We may decide that a distinct rural life ended around World War II, killed by automobiles and television and all of the other homogenizing agents of our society. If we do, that will make the archivist's job much easier.

Still, rural people claim that rural living is different from urban living, and that the difference is what attracts them. A national REC survey in 1992 indicated that rural people are attracted to country living because of its slower pace, the closeness and friendliness of rural communities, and the human scale on which it is conducted. Rural people also mention the closeness of families in rural settings, and the natural surroundings that enrich the souls of children and adults. There may also be subtexts to the litany of praise for rural life, such as the desire for cheap housing and low property taxes, or the comfort of living in more homogenous, less racially and ethnically diverse communities.

Now, I started this essay by suggesting that image and reality are not one in the same, and what rural people want and think they're getting might not match what is being actually delivered. Rural and urban people alike associate rural living with close and conventional families, and, while that might be the case generally, it is hardly universal. Rural families can be dysfunctional, and divorce, single parenting, and same-sex couples are phenomena that can be found in virtually any rural area in the United States. Demographic trends in rural America lag urban trends, but they follow the same trajectory.

The notion that rural communities are especially close and caring also deserves some scrutiny. Community involves both inclusion and exclusion; people are defined in and also defined out. Rural communities can be friendly and welcoming, but they can also be cold and hostile, especially to those considered "different." Fifteen years ago I was conducting interviews in south central North Dakota, and I walked into a small town café for lunch. As I came through the door, everyone stopped talking and starred at me. Then they resumed talking—in German. There was a community there that was close and that probably provided great sustenance to its members, but it was hardly welcoming to outsiders. Moreover, living among those who are caring and attentive has a downside in that members of the community sacrifice the privacy and individual autonomy many

Americans prize. Close inspection will also reveal that rural communities are frequently split along racial, religious, occupational, and class lines. Their scale means that you know who you dislike by name, not that everyone inevitably gets along.

So, what does all of this mean to archivists and others who seek to collect materials that document the reality of rural America today? The reality of rural America has changed dramatically—more dramatically by far than has our conception of that reality. The materials we collect are the materials we have always collected, and as such they are heavily oriented toward commercial agriculture. As I have already discussed, there are plenty of good—or at least readily understandable—reasons for that. What we have to do now is figure out how to capture the experience of the 93 percent of rural people who do not farm. But before we set about doing that, we have to decide whether their "rural" experience makes their lives substantially different from the lives of urban Americans. If, as may well be the case, they are basically people with urban professions, tastes, and culture who happen to live in a rural place, then it is probably not appropriate to document their lives as "rural." We need to begin by finding out what experiences and expectations are specific to rural life. We need to know more about why rural people choose to live in rural settings, about what they expected to find, and about whether they found it. We might discover that rural life is simply American life, with all of its promises and problems, just lived on a smaller and more personalized scale. Or we might find that it is truly different and that the difference can be documented.

I believe that the determination whether contemporary rural people should be documented as "rural" and the subsequent documentation itself must lean heavily on oral interviews. Rural non-farmers don't share an economic enterprise and they don't share organizational affiliations. If we want to understand them, and the life they lead, we need to start talking to them, and that conversation has to be focused on such basic issues as: Why did you choose to live here? What is this life like? How does this place differ from others where you have lived? And has life in this place met your expectations? When we begin to collect the answers to those questions, then we will begin to develop an understanding of rural life today.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE LAND

Dean Carlson

I'm a farmer. I live and work on a flat ancient lakebed that once was glacial Lake Agassiz. From my living room window I can see the village of Kennedy, Minnesota three miles away. I farm in a sparsely populated portion of the country far from any metropolitan area. I'm one hour north of Grand Forks, North Dakota and one and a half hours south of Winnipeg, Manitoba. A trip to the Twin Cities requires a full day's journey.

I believe that I epitomize the typical Midwestern farmer. I raise wheat, barley, canola, soybeans and sugarbeets. I love the smell of the neighbors' finely cut alfalfa, hate daylight savings time, seldom lock my vehicle's doors, wave to everyone I meet and never answer questionnaires concerning my planting intentions or my farm's production.

My job description is varied. I'm an agronomist, commodities marketer, mechanic, machinery operator and accountant. In the day-to-day management of my farm, I view myself as a problem solver and crisis manager. People tell me that we farmers are lucky to be self-employed. We can do what we want when we want. But can we? Yes, we perhaps don't have bosses lording over us but we have other intangibles such as weather, markets, self-esteem and peer pressure that can drive us more ruthlessly than any human employer.

Farming is a demanding occupation filled with hurried schedules. It's no wonder why recent farm periodicals are filled with columns on how to handle stress. It's been my experience that employees also suffer from burn out. Their schedules must be juggled so as to give them some needed time off.

Deadlines must be met. If wheat is planted on May 1st, my combines must be ready to thresh by August 10. In that short 100-day time frame, many things must be accomplished. Different crops will have to be planted on a timely basis. If not, an early frost will reduce yield. To insure proper effectiveness, herbicides will have to be applied in the sometimes narrow window of opportunity. Row crops must be cultivated and time must occasionally be taken to watch my youngest son play summer baseball or to take a family vacation.

At the time that this is being written, it is mid June. Seeding has been continually interrupted by rain delays. What once looked like an early spring has turned into a frustrating time of waiting for water soaked fields to dry. Spring tillage and planting has taken place in high-energy spurts before being halted by another rain.

While we wait for dryer weather, we busy ourselves by doing maintenance to our farm machinery. The farm shop's clock states that it is time for morning lunch break. Sitting with my oldest son and employees, we drink coffee and eat microwaved doughnuts. Friendly insults are volleyed back and forth. One employee is being teased for not being able to seed straight. The conversation quickly turns to the fuel economy of the 35O Chevrolet engine before another employee explains how a horse's halter can be made from a single strand of rope.

I join the banter and conversation but in the back of my mind I think of the impending deadlines and those that have already been missed. Several questions are being mentally tossed. Is it too late to continue seeding? Under optimum growing

conditions, what will a late seeded crop produce? What is a more realistic yield goal? At the present commodity prices, does it pay to keep seeding? Should I just trim my losses and fallow the remainder of my unseeded land? In two more days, the wild oats will have grown one more leaf. Will the land dry in time to allow me to apply the chemical on time? If not, should I consider switching to another herbicide? If so, what is the difference in cost and will I lose control of some of the other weeds that I wish to kill? What is the economic threshold of letting a few weeds go?

It's a situation of too many difficult questions with too many unknowns. I guess that's the challenge of this profession.

A retired farmer once told me why he loved his occupation so much. He explained that he lived for the challenge and enjoyed the element of risk. It gave him an opportunity to pit his skills and wits against a multitude of adversaries: weather, weeds, poor prices and machinery breakdowns. When I stop to analyze why I do this for a living, I guess I'd have to agree with him. Besides, if this was easy, everyone would want to do it.

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Attending a luncheon, my wife and I sat at a table with another couple who were about our age. Introducing ourselves, we found out that they too were farmers. Having similar interests, the conversation came easily. We learned that they both held college degrees. Besides being a housewife, the wife taught school and ran a small business.

As we talked, she made the comment, "I wonder how many more jobs I'll have to hold to support this farm."

Her statement was typical of many farm families who are struggling to supplement their farm's income. A growing number of farmers and their spouses are finding that working off the farm is necessary. For this couple, off farm income was part of the formula for their farm's survival.

So what else is there? Given the present agricultural economy, how does a farm continue to exist? Like any business, a contingency plan is needed. You know, something to fall back on when the income side of the ledger sheet won't cover the expenses.

Off farm income is one method to keep the farm solvent. If you ask any farmer how they're planning on getting through these tough times, he'll probably tell you that he's cutting costs. However, that same farmer will tell you that he has also cut all that he can without hurting his productivity.

Every farmer that I know is an astute businessman. If there is any fat in his operation, it'll get trimmed. If a dollar is going to be invested, its rate of return is carefully analyzed. Machinery purchases are being put on hold. A friend once told me that a man isn't going to cash flow the farm by trimming the electric bill.

He's right.

When a farmer goes through his budget line by line and seeks to trim expenditures, it's the big-ticket items such as seed, fertilizer, chemical and fuel that must be cut. Unfortunately, when these are reduced, yields fall. That seems counter productive.

Diversification is another option. The Freedom to Farm bill was intended to allow farmers to plant whatever crops he or she felt would bring the best return. In theory, we now plant what the market dictates.

I like that.

Yes, this complicates our lives. Raising a variety of different crops means stretching our management skills, purchasing specialty equipment and requires more manpower. However, it's a challenge we farmers accept as part of the occupation. It also makes good agronomic sense.

The problem is that every commodity which we can raise shows no profit potential. When we ask ourselves what crop will generate more dollars, we find that there are none.

We are told by economists that we should find a niche for a specialty crop. Upon doing so, we should fill it. A small fraction of one percent of farmers have done such a thing. By doing so, these people have been able to add a few dollars to their bottom line.

However, there are only so many niches to fill. Most of them amount to nothing more than a hobby. This method will not save rural America.

Perhaps the biggest buzzword in farm country these days is "Value Added". It means investing in a company, probably a cooperative, that takes the raw produce and processes it into a product for the consumer, eliminating the middleman. That makes sense. When doing so, several questions must be addressed. How much risk is involved? How much do I dare invest? Will the amount of product that I deliver to the Value Added Company have a significant impact on my bottom line?

Recently, there have been several value added ventures available for investment. Many farmers that I know have declined participation. The reasons are obvious. Most farmers just don't have any extra capital available. They also felt that the risk was too great. If the company failed, their dollars would be lost.

So . . .it's a frustrating situation. This year, many farms were saved by Congressional emergency funding. This was greatly appreciated. However, what about next year. At what point does an urban dominated Congress get tired of farmers and farm state legislatures crying for help? Shouldn't the problem be solved on a permanent basis?

My biggest fear is that one day Congress and the American public will become calloused toward domestic farm problems and decide to throw this country's food supply into the hands of foreign producers.

For anyone who buys groceries, that would be too bad.

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Combines fascinate me.

The interlocking complexity of sprockets, belts and shafts that these giant machines possess is a source of amazement. To see these self propelled giants travel down a field at the pace of a fast walk while cutting the standing wheat and separating the kernels of grain from the chaff and straw makes me marvel at the intelligent engineering minds who were responsible for this invention.

Over the years, the comforts for the operator have also been improved. Sitting in the cab of a modern combine is like driving one's automobile.

My problem is that I don't get a chance to spend very much time running a combine during harvest. My responsibilities are moving augers, drying grain, fixing broken pieces of machinery and just being a "gopher". Consequently, the harvest crew on

this American family farm are my three teen-aged sons. The 18 and 15 year old run the combines while the 13 year old drives the grain cart.

While watching them in action, I've got to admit that they're good at it.

No.

They're VERY good at it.

Without losing a step, the 13 year old pulls his cart under a combine's unloading auger. In unison, the two of them travel down the field until the combine's grain tank is emptied. The cart is then swung around to meet the other combine to unload his hopper as well. When the cart is full, it is emptied into a waiting truck.

It's good to see the boys working as a team. Combines do that. They bring people together to work for a common goal. They're also teaching my sons something about the work ethic besides giving them an opportunity to pick up skills in mechanics and equipment operation that will be beneficial later in life.

The down side of these machines is their price tag. I guess that shouldn't surprise me. However, I can't help but feel that if there were more major manufacturers of combines looking to sell their products, the price might be a little more affordable.

When I was a kid, five different companies were retailing their combines locally. That created some healthy competition. Today, there are two. With all the mergers and acquisitions taking place, I wouldn't be surprised to see only one major manufacturer in the business of selling combines in the near future.

That's what happening in agribusiness. On my farm's input side, companies are continually merging to form large conglomerates. As a farmer, I'm now forced to buy my seed, fertilizer, chemical and machinery from an ever-dwindling number of large corporations. With fewer firms competing against each other to sell me these products, I have fewer people to choose from when making purchases. One doesn't have to be an economics professor to realize why my costs continue to rise. Often, the same company that sells me herbicides also owns the genetics of the seed that I buy. For me, that doesn't sound like a very healthy situation.

The same scenario is taking place when I'm selling my produce. Grain buyers and exporters have merged to the point where there are now only a handful of firms buying my wheat.

With these changes taking place, is it any wonder that we farmers feel preyed upon?

I suppose one could argue that farms are also are growing larger. That seems to be the trend. To pay for these high capacity combines, one has to cover many acres in a short period of time. In an average day, my three adolescent sons can thresh enough wheat to bake 550,000 loaves of bread. That'll feed a city of three and one third million people for a day. The Minneapolis\St. Paul metropolitan area could be supplied for a day and a half.

That's a lot.

But even with those heady figures in mind, one has to remember that there are tens of thousands of family farms like mine across the country. Not one is a large enough producer to control the market. That's the secret to America's inexpensive food supply.

If the population exodus from the farm continues, a generation from now only a handful of producers will be raising this country's food. The odds are, those entities will be large corporate companies. The production side of agriculture will become dominated

by a few people. If that happens, what do you suppose will happen to the price of groceries?

It just might be that the greatest investment that this generation of Americans can make is to put together a farm policy that will keep as many farmers as possible on the land and to avoid what happened to the combine industry.

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If I go broke farming, I think I'll become a Sears repairman. Having good dexterity with small hand tools and plenty of experience, I feel I have the proper qualifications for the job.

You see, about three weeks ago, the motor on my wife's Sears clothes dryer died. Reasoning that my time could be better spent repairing my combines and tillage equipment for the upcoming harvest, I called the Sears Company for a service technician. In doing so, I made the stunning discovery that Sears has discontinued sending repairmen to our part of the country. Evidently it no longer was cost effective for them to have employees driving their white vans into sparsely populated areas to service their appliances.

I had to make a decision. Either I could order the Motor and install it myself or fix the clothes lines. I chose the motor. The installation took me a whole afternoon and about a dozen trips out to my shop for different tools.

A week later, a roller that holds the clothes dryer's rotating drum broke. Once again, I ordered the part. This time, I disassembled the appliance, replaced the broken roller and reassembled the dryer in half an hour.

The second time always goes easier. Nevertheless, when a person is scrambling to get things done around the farm, repairing a household appliance is a job that I'd rather hire out.

Now, I'm telling you this story not because I wish to brag about my prowess in handling a phillips screwdriver and a 3/8th inch open-end wrench. I mention it because this seemingly minor inconvenience stands as a prime example of what it's like to live away from population centers.

The fact that a national company such as Sears made a management decision to trim an unprofitable segment of their operation doesn't surprise me. I certainly don't begrudge them that choice. If I were on their management team, I'd probably do the same thing.

The problem is this. As the migration from rural America continues, those of us who remain are finding that the services and conveniences which we once enjoyed have disappeared along with the population. In my mind, that's lowering my standard of living. Therefore, the present farm crisis has become not only an economic but also a social issue.

As I found out, not having repair service certainly isn't an insurmountable obstacle. However, there are many other more important issues involved. As populations decline schools consolidate, resulting in lengthening bus rides for students. With fewer dollars to work with, school districts must trim their teaching staffs and classes are omitted. Many communities are losing their health care, restaurants and entertainment facilities. Longer trips must now be made to obtain these services. Main streets are filled

with empty buildings. Recreational entities such as golf courses and swimming pools have more difficulty remaining open. Churches find it hard to pay clergy a decent wage, forcing them to either merge or share speakers.

To state that declining population is a new problem in rural America would be a mistake. The shift from rural to urban has been going on for decades. However, with poor crops and terrible commodity prices during the past four years, the exodus has accelerated dramatically.

Reversing the trend is going to be very difficult. With farm states and districts having less political clout in Congress, passing legislation that protects the family farm from unfair imports while providing a safety net will remain a difficult task.

So . . . . how does one cope with these changes?

Very subtly, we find ourselves constantly adapting and adjusting. We've certainly become more mobile. Spending one or two hours on the highway is now viewed as a fact of life. It might seem a bit enigmatic, but my conversations with farmers tell me that they are gradually thinking in more regional terms while still being supportive of the small businesses in their home communities. If they have to pay a little more to purchase locally, they'll do it.

Our friends and social acquaintances take in a much larger geographical area. Barriers between small communities have come down and petty grievances have been put aside as people work toward the common goal of surviving this agricultural slump.

We've also had to become a little more self reliant, like fixing the clothes dryer ourselves.

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A couple of related questions that people in the Midwest have been asking are "Who is going to survive this rural crisis?" and "Who will be left to farm the land?" I believe that the answer to those questions lies somewhere within a complicated formula filled with subjective unknowns and uncontrollable factors.

The basic equation would read something like this: *Proper Weather + Good Management Skills + Good Commodity Prices* yields *Success.* Within each variable could also be added several subfactors such as soil fertility, good employees, dry combining days, high protein wheat, debt load, a limited amount of machinery breakdowns and . . . luck.

Please note that two of the three ingredients to the main equation are outside of the farmer's control. That's too bad. In the past three years, I've witnessed some pretty good farmers forced to leave their occupations because of circumstances that they could do nothing about.

With that in mind, it's very difficult to pinpoint a specific group of farmers that stands a better chance of weathering the present storm. However, I think I can identify a group possessing some qualities that give them an edge.

You see, I belong to a marketing club. Twice a month we meet with an instructor who will lead the class in discussing different commodity marketing strategies. The group consists of about 25 farmers who not only are my peers but are also my friends.

All of them fit my definition of a "good" farmer. That is, they seem to get their work done on time and somehow manage to coax the land to produce, even under adverse

weather conditions. Some of them farm very fertile land while others work with more marginal types. In the past, all have continually upgraded and renewed their line of farm machinery. Whenever they have done so, I've always been happy for them. That means that there would always be a supply of used equipment that I could afford to buy.

Their average age is somewhere in the mid 40's. Unlike baseball players who peak in their late 20's, these guys are now at the top of their game. Most have college degrees. All are well read and know their business extremely well. They're good with numbers. If I were to ask any one of them to recite their ratio of current assets to liabilities, I have no doubt that they could rattle off those figures without hesitation.

They're risk takers but not with a riverboat gambler's mentality. That type of person went broke long ago. In the past several years, all have gradually increased the extent of their farming operations. Their expansions, however, have been careful and calculated. Their personalities are what a psychologist would call Type A. All are pro active. If something needs to be done or a problem needs to be solved, they'll rise to the occasion and find a solution. Many are a bit high strung. But . . . that comes with the personality. All would agree that a little stress is good in that it pumps up the adrenaline, resulting in greater productivity. But they're also concerned with stress's proper management.

Because of their similar backgrounds and occupation, it's no wonder that they hold common points of view on a number of issues. They feel cheated by government policies, frustrated by a series of short crops and unappreciated by a growing urban population. As the size of their farms has grown, they complain how they now must covert more acres in less time. They worry about finding a free day for some much needed recreation or relaxation. They're also concerned that their sons and daughters will dislike farming's lifestyle and decide to leave the family farm after high school or college.

If ever there was a group of farmers who possessed the personalities and expertise to weather the present farm crisis, it is these men. However, seeing their equity erode and profit margins becoming slim or non existent, they will be the first to admit that their farming operations are also at risk.

So . . . is this the type of person who will be farming the land? I believe so.

In the book of Matthew, Jesus makes the statement, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." As a Christian, I believe that statement with all of my heart. However, if the verse is read with modern farming in mind, it's equally important to note what Jesus did not say. Jesus said that the meek would INHERIT the earth, not FARM it.

There's a big difference.

Now, perhaps some of my good friends might disagree and accuse me of stretching Biblical truths. But, I seriously doubt if the meek would want anything to do with today's farming. It's not an occupation for the timid or the faint of heart. No . . . I think the meek will rent the earth out to some Type A personality who is optimistic enough to think that he can somehow turn a dollar. Probably someone from my marketing group.

WHO HAD TO BE THERE? MAKING CHOICES ABOUT DOCUMENTING CHANGE IN AGRICULTURE AND RURAL LIFE

Bob Horton

Introduction

In 2000, the Minnesota and North Dakota state historic records advisory boards (SHRAB) began work on a collaborative project, *Agriculture and rural life: documenting change*, with support from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). Geographically, the focus was on the Red River Valley, the boundary between the two states. Conceptually, its focus and goals were summarized in the original application to the NHPRC:

> a) define important components of change in rural society in the late 20th century;
> b) identify extant records (inside and outside of repositories) that document those changes;
> c) consider additional non-traditional sources;
> d) outline a practical means of creating documentation if necessary;
> e) prioritize sources against spatial and financial limitations of collecting organizations;
> f) propose methods of accessibility; and
> g) develop a set of "best practices" for approaching documentation of rural life, in cooperation with state, regional and local repositories.[1]

There were a variety of motives behind this, but two were stressed in the proposal and are especially worth noting. First, there was a concern that repositories in the two states collected a vast quantity of records that were not being used. While much scholarly research was done on rural society, rather little of it depended on the material we were accumulating. The second concern focused on the question of expertise. Both SHRABs felt strongly that making decisions about documentation could best proceed with the close involvement of the people on the ground.

The former concern was a frank admission that something was amiss. If a traditional set of patrons was not using the critical mass of archived records in any significant way, then a new orientation and a new allocation of resources were in order. The latter concern was, in the eyes of most members of the Boards and most who have reviewed the project since, the most exciting element of the project. Asking, as the consensus put it, "real people" about their lives would be the critically innovative component of a new approach to documenting agricultural and rural life.

In other respects, the work plan closely mirrored other examples of documentation strategy projects. As, for example, detailed in works by Helen Samuels, Bruce Bruemmer and Richard Cox, a documentation strategy defined a focus; involved a cooperative effort; looked at a broad array of features (e.g., institutional functions) rather than records themselves; considered means to bridge documentation gaps; crossed disciplines; identified priorities; and developed an appraisal tool to guide decisions about collecting.[2]

In sum, then, the project began with the assumptions that something had to be done, that just rounding up the usual suspects would be insufficient and that the established process for documentation planning was a good model. To understand the project's evolution and to assess its results, we have to look at those assumptions and answer three questions about them:

What did we learn about the components of change?

What did we learn from talking to "real people?"

What did we learn about the process of developing a documentation strategy?

Answering these questions will outline how we can move from information gathering to decision making, from hearing about records to choosing which records to collect.

What did we learn about the components of change?

We were interested in defining the components of change because we wanted to determine priorities for documentation. The fact that the Red River Valley was undergoing all sorts of changes was indisputable; the nature of those changes, and the records that best documented them, were the subject of our analysis. We learned that change could be defined on two levels, the macro and micro, and that increased or better documentation would not necessarily inspire more research at either level.

There is an enormous amount of work appearing on agricultural and rural life, written by all sorts of people, in all sorts of genres and disciplines. So much published material is available that, in 1995, the *New York Times* began a review of four recent books on agricultural life with this observation: "At times, there seem to be nearly as many people writing about farming as there are actual farmers. And with the rate that agribusiness is gobbling up small holdings, the equation might actually be approaching parity."[3] Despite the note of irony, this rings true.

Clearly, if archivists are collecting the wrong sorts of records, or not enough of the right ones, these mistakes have had a negligible effect on the production of studies of agriculture and rural life. The disjunction is partially explained by the idea of motivation. As David Danbom noted, research into rural America picked up when the concept of social history became widely accepted. "Beginning in the midsixties, there was such an outpouring of work … that it was possible by 1981 for Robert Swierengen to write of the 'new rural history.' Since then, this outpouring has become a flood."[4]

This has implications for the development of a documentation strategy. When planning how to expand the user base and of collecting "better" records, it is not a case of "build the archives and they will come." The availability of adequate documentation may enable research, but does not inspire it. What made the "new rural history" possible was a change in the way the historical profession determined what was scholarly and what was not. When new topics became legitimate areas of study, then historians looked around to see which records would fit the bill. This was not a situation where the archivists were the catalysts.

Because historians are aware of the effects of shifting academic fashions, we found them reluctant to make any final recommendations about documentation, when we began looking for advice on how to adapt our appraisal criteria. When asked about

change, the historians looked inward; they emphasized that their profession would evolve, and evolve in ways they could not predict. As a result, their testimony was inconclusive. The summary of the academic interest group meeting held in July 2000 notes, "The group was uncomfortable with guessing what historians may use in the future, and was caught inside the box when discussing the present."[5] In consequence, most suggestions from academics were practical, rather then conceptual; instead of documentation priorities, there were concrete recommendations for helping local repositories, primarily in order to make more material available and to open more avenues for research in the future.

There may have been another reason for the historians' reluctance to settle on a firm documentation agenda. In the professional literature, there is a strong, explicit consensus that "change" is not new to the area nor, indeed, to agriculture and rural life almost anywhere in America. To the contrary, the outline and the details of change have been apparent and consistent for most of the century. The cultural, economic, demographic and economic factors all point in the same direction - towards the cities and away from the farm.

To quote David Danbom once more, "The twenties foretold the course of agriculture over the rest of the century." And, in more detail, "For most of this century the Great Plains, like most of the rest of the West, has been a ward of the United States, maintaining its standard of living only because more money flows in through federal transfer payments than flows out in the form of taxes."[6] Or, to quote a recent article in the *New York Times*, "Many historians have long argued that white settlement, particularly of the northern Plains, was largely government-induced from the start, through subsidies to railroads and homesteaders."[7] As these imply, there is a very strong case that the history of the Red River Valley, and perhaps most of rural America, is written in Washington, DC. At the very least, the study of any region has to be located within the larger economic and political context that frames it.

Perhaps the situation seems more dramatic now since, as the pace of change accelerates, local and rural institutions appear increasingly less viable. Their disappearance, paradoxically, makes their contingent nature all the more apparent. Our sense of that contingency is reinforced because the nature of change has been remarkably consistent over time and geography. The agricultural economy of the United States was and is part of a global economy. In the Red River valley, this has been true since European settlement.[8] The area has never enjoyed any autonomy from the effects of government policy or market conditions. As a result, the broad nature of the change it has undergone in the past several decades is in many ways similar to that which every agricultural area in this country has undergone in that period.

What that implies, of course, is that nothing about the area is unique at a macro-level. There is, to borrow from academic jargon, one meta-narrative for agricultural and rural life that is essentially the same across the United States. From that perspective, most of rural America looks the same. Gross statistical data from the U.S. Census or other government agencies, articles from the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*, reports on federal agricultural policy or developments in NAFTA or GATT might provide all the significant documentation someone needs to understand the why and the how of changes in agriculture and rural life.

This sheds some light on the conclusions Mark Greene drew from a sampling of academic publications on the 20th century rural society, done in preparation for the project proposal. As noted in the application to the NHPRC, "The most frequently cited sources are government reports and statistics, followed by scholarly monographs and journal articles, followed by newspaper articles (one author ranks the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* as the best sources for information on agriculture, along with the *Des Moines Register*, while most authors rely on papers of the locality being studied)."[9] The historians seem to have it right; nothing we learned suggests that better sources exist for studies of change in agriculture and rural life at the macro level.

The other side of the equation, though, is what occurs on the micro level. While the overall narrative of change might be depressingly similar across the region, the individual responses to that narrative, the stories of people reacting to those changes, are all unique and different. Adequate documentation would be a function of some dialectic between the macro and micro levels, between the actions and reactions of social forces and individuals. This, of course, is true of practically any historical event. As analogy, consider what Omer Bartov noted recently, "It is only through the telling of numerous personal tales that the reality of the Holocaust can somehow be grasped and the generalizations inherent to collective histories and sweeping theses be complicated and enriched."[10] For a complete history, we need both the personal tales and the collective histories.

But to what degree is difficult to say. Certainly nothing in the project gave us the insight necessary to determine how many or whose individual triumphs or tragedies are sufficient to tell the story of the Red River Valley. Nor did we discover any compelling evidence that one form or another of documentation would best meet this need. In some ways, the fuller appreciation of individual diversity we realized resists the reduction that is inevitably part of a documentation strategy. If we emphasize the individual response to change, then we value difference at the most granular level. We start to deconstruct the collective history when we note even the smallest details; there is less and less in common when we look this closely. At that point, we come close to saying that everyone has a story and every story is worth telling, with the possible corollary that every story is worth saving, too. But that spiral into the particular makes managing archives impossible. All sorts of practical limitations serve to keep us somewhere closer to the macro and further from the micro level of documentation.

For example, the major project currently supported by the Minnesota Historical Society is the creation of a museum in Minneapolis telling the story of the flour industry. The approach here is analogous to that described in William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, where one city's economic development to a fascinating extent influenced the fate and even the appearance of the geographical area dependent upon it.[11] As the Society noted in a proposal for support of its Mill City Museum project, "More than 100 years ago, forces converged here to make Minneapolis the flour-milling capital of the world. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, what happened here continues to shape your world."[12] While the plans for the museum are still taking shape, it seems clear that its goal will be to select and interpret an illustrative set of individual stories, within an exhibit and as a metonym, where a part speaks for the whole.

What did we learn from talking to "real people?"

I placed quotations around the term "real people" because the term was the subject of some contention during the project, often sparked by my own, pronounced distrust of the dichotomy it implies. The term's advocates spoke eloquently of the need to get the opinions of the people on the ground about their own lives and the issues affecting them, so that any decisions about documenting those lives could reasonably be made. This feeling was shared by most all of the two SHRABs' board members and it was an approach notably praised by commentators on the project. It would, in fact, be hard not to praise it. A grass roots approach has an undeniable appeal, raising connotations of Jefferson, democracy and town meetings.

I was nonetheless wary, for a variety of reasons. For the project, gathering information was only a starting point. The critical components of developing a documentation strategy came afterwards. A final product was dependent on taking one more step, analyzing the information we gathered, and then, even more important, taking the final step and making decisions about professional practice on the basis of the analysis. To accomplish all of those tasks would involve the ongoing input, review and cooperation of a number of groups, institutions and informants, but the final determinations and decisions would reflect the understanding and resources of the archivists. To begin that complex process by privileging one group of informants as "real" seemed problematic. Their input was valuable, but it still had to be evaluated. Otherwise, we ran the risk of taking the first slip down the slope to an uncritical acceptance of the stories people told about themselves.

This was a danger. As Kathryn Marie Dudley has compellingly noted, much of what Americans think about agricultural and rural life has been informed by a variety of mythologies: "There is a serious disconnection between what we know and what we want to believe about farming as a way of life."[13] In a recent issue of *Daedalus* examining Minnesota, Joseph and Anthony Amato spoke even more starkly about the process of inventing a heritage, with particular reference to a point close to home: "The notion of a Minnesota culture immediately strikes observers as counterfeit. Minnesota, never a natural or cultural unit, was born and nurtured by continuous artifice."[14]

These critiques raise important questions about perspective. As many a citizen has told me in my travels through Minnesota, things look different from St. Paul. Whether that distance measures objectivity or ignorance is a legitimate and probably inevitable subject for debate. Any answer is a shot at a moving target. But privileging one perspective runs the danger of making decisions impossible to reach. Even the most practical of farmers can become postmodernists when disputing the ability of an urban bureaucrat to understand their realities. But the farmers' perspectives may not be and certainly are not automatically better, they are simply different. That difference may be informative, but still fall short of being persuasive.[15]

With those caveats in mind, we can ask, "What did we learn from the people on the ground?" On one level, we made connections; we liked the people we met. As all the project staff would agree, everyone was extraordinarily open and gracious. To a captivating degree, our contacts were articulate, knowledgeable and enthusiastic. To an extent, this just reflects the selection process, as anyone who was not interested in the topic or unwilling to discuss it could simply ignore the invitation to a meeting. We only

met people who wanted to help out, a situation that mirrors the experience of others in the field. As noted in a description of a University of Michigan ethnographer's work in North Dakota, "Anthropologists say they work hard to get divergent views. But they naturally spend the most time with the friendliest people." As the article goes on to point out, this presents a problem for analysis. "Ethnographies offer rich detail and texture, but require randomized, controlled surveys to back up their anecdotal points."[16]

Anecdotes we had. Surveys we did not. They were well beyond the scope of the project. As a result, the information we gathered has to be treated warily, as our sampling was not scientific.[17] We met a limited number of people and spoke to them for limited periods. In addition, we met only people who stayed behind, an interesting consequence of having a specific geographic focus, but something of a constraint when dealing with the concept of change and particularly with its most notable feature here: emigration on a scale which, in some places, verged on depopulation. Our contacts were in many ways making a stand. Their stories could be usefully balanced by hearing from some of those who left the area and moved to a city or suburb.[18]

This is not to say that the people we met presented unbalanced accounts. Indeed, Ken Ware, the extension agent at the Ada Interest Group Meeting, September 2000, spoke persuasively about the larger context for agriculture and especially the critical impact of national policy: the emphasis on cheap food makes small farming uneconomical; and the trade barriers against Caribbean sugar prop up the sugar beet agribusiness. This certainly echoes the concept of a global economy and the implication that the history of the Red River Valley is often written somewhere else.

Just as persuasively, at the Social Services Interest Group Meeting, September 2000, Doug Seiler addressed the complications of record keeping in a bureaucratic age. A North Dakota social worker, he noted that he worked with 259 agencies in this region. Conceivably, a variety of these agencies could interact with individuals and families in any number of permutations, as they are variously oriented towards geography, political subdivision, age groups, health concerns, traumas/emergencies, occupational groups, incomes, specific social or cultural factors, ethnic origin and so on. As a result, any single individual's transit through the region or through life could involve an array of contacts and transactions crossing a whole variety of communities and boundaries. A kaleidoscope might be better suited to capturing that experience than an archive.

The mention of a kaleidoscope raises an important issue - how we looked at things, how we framed the project. We did need to set some boundaries. One aspect was conceptual: we confined our interests to change in agriculture and rural life. Another was geographic: each state in the collaboration had selected a different area of concentration. North Dakota picked three counties, a political concept. Minnesota picked a watershed district, a topographic concept, and one that crossed more clearly artificial boundaries. What we heard from our informants about boundaries was something slightly different and much more fluid. The actual point of comparison most often raised in meetings was the concept of community. Despite its popularity, we did not get a hard and fast definition of it.

For the majority of people, community meant the place where they lived, but that was a net thrown over many diverse entities and concepts. Becoming a mere bedroom community, for example, was an invidious end to some residents of small towns, so even the basic term had to be qualified. As well, internally, every community, even the

smallest, draws distinctions, between young and old, insider and outsider, rich and poor, good farmer or bad and so on. In one meeting, for example, Brian Gion, Steele County North Dakota Extension Agent, blamed "poor marketing skills on many farm liquidations. Gion believes that to survive in today's agricultural business climate, you have to be a full-time expert marketer. Without that, great crops aren't going to save you."[19] No doubt one of those less than expert marketers has something additional to say about that. As Kathryn Dudley wrote, and which I read as a lament, "There are always other stories to be told."[20]

But there is a different way of thinking about community. As we learned, a community has distinguishable physical aspects or institutions, which are most important because they have symbolic value - i.e., the significance of having a local school, hardware store, grocery store or bank was that it connoted independence, an autonomous viability as a distinct entity. This symbolic value creates and reinforces a sense of identity, but that essentially works in a binary sense: a place has a school or it does not, it is a community or it is not. In some ways, this is similar to the arguments about the value of a major league sports team. The Twin Cities have some shaky franchises that most often make a pitch for public support and a new stadium on the grounds that, without professional sports, Minneapolis and St. Paul would be like a colder Omaha. In other words, they would lose their identity as big league towns.

Identity is different from history. Keeping the Twins in Minnesota preserves an image, but keeping the records of the Minnesota Twins would not sufficiently document the state. Similarly, a school or a bank really is not the same as the community, and having the records of a school or of a bank does not equate to documenting the community. Since it was principally at the symbolic level that our informants were talking about community, the conversations did not lead to very productive discussions about record keeping in the sense of a regional documentation strategy. Instead, we can follow the thread of that conversation to another emblem of identity: the local historical society.

The project identified roughly twenty institutions actively collecting records in the region, not counting public libraries, repositories at the state and national level with records of interest or any organizations that maintained their own archives. That makes for a lot of records, but, more significantly, a lot of repositories and potential repositories per capita. The phenomenon is not peculiar to the Valley. There are over 300 local and county historical societies in Minnesota. Why so many? The answer is complex. On one level, an historical society is increasingly an obligatory component of the basic cultural apparatus of contemporary society. This can be inferred from the description of the development plans for Cooperstown, ND, "Boasting an art gallery, museum, golf course, and full service community center, the community is looking to provide similar services to those found in Fargo."[21]

On another level, the local historical society evinces a sincere concern for the past, but, given the level of resources and commitment available for support, this concern could take the form of heritage rather than history. As David Lowenthal suggests, the two are very different: "Heritage … is not a testable or even a reasonably plausible account of some past, but a *declaration of faith* [italics in the original] in that past … heritage is not history, even when it mimics history. It uses historical traces and tells historical tales, but these tales and traces are stitched into fables that are open neither to critical analysis nor

to comparative scrutiny."[22] The possibility is acute because the prospect of change, particularly change construed as loss, is a powerful motivating factor: "Legacies at risk are cherished for their very fragility. The heritage of rural life is exalted because it is everywhere at risk, if not already lost."[23]

In all, verifying the variety of repositories working in the Red River Valley and the variety of their motivations was an important consequence of talking to "real people." But, as with the appreciation of individual experiences, diversity complicates the development of a documentation strategy. In practice, for a geographic region, that demands movement towards selection of a set of priorities that reflect a consensus and can inspire collaboration across institutions.

What did we learn about the process of developing a documentation strategy?

There are a number of definitions of a documentation strategy in the archival literature, but Richard Cox has a concise recommendation on how to develop one:

> What is desired to be known, according to present knowledge and conceptions of future research (about as best as can be determined), about a particular topic or geographic area is ascertained and the existing documentation evaluated to determine not only what should be saved but what gaps there are and how they can be supplemented. The focus is on the importance of an ongoing activity or in identifying the important features of a geographical region rather than their informational byproducts.[24]

This more or less comprises the agenda for the project, but all the steps proved impossible to accomplish in the time and with the resources available. Gathering information consumed much of our energies. As well, gathering information was a more comfortable task than some of the others on the agenda. Cox's use of the passive tense in the quotation above hints at the disagreeable nature of some of the tasks that fully comprise the development of a documentation strategy. Decisions are not just made - *someone* makes them. That is a critical, but often extraordinarily difficult act because archivists recognize that we cannot save even everything that is worth saving. Saying no, then, is ultimately one major consequence of a documentation plan. Someone says no: no to those records, no to those issues, no to those institutions, people and places. Nancy Reagan aside, not many people are comfortable with the prospect of just saying no. At the end of a process that emphasized diversity and the appreciation of difference, it is especially hard to make such decisions. For two SHRABs, dealing with a complex region, a volatile mix of issues and an array of constituencies, saying no means taking an intellectual approach to an emotional issue that will undoubtedly have political ramifications.

We realize that developing even a modicum of support for such a documentation program and strategy would demand an ongoing process and mechanism for negotiation and collaboration. In that sense, we have validated the experience of a number of documentation strategy projects.[25] A one-time infusion of resources for an analysis can only carry work forward to a certain point. The application of program funds and a corresponding re-orientation of program activities would be necessary to implement a

strategy on a comprehensive basis. Helen Samuels emphasized the collaborative aspects of this: "Documentation strategies are multi-institutional activities, as they are intended to coordinate and plan the natural dispersion of the integrated documentation of modern society." She added an important point: "Documentation strategies rely on strong institutional archives."[26] Given the enormously varied levels of resources and expertise among the institutions covered in this project, it is probable that one of the state historical societies would have to make a serious commitment to foster that collaboration across the region.

The deterrent to making that commitment is that such cooperation would be very difficult to coordinate, even if some consensus for action was achieved. Think about maintaining that consensus over even a relatively short term. Consider the number of organizations involved and the often very broad nature of their missions. Factor in the scarcity of resources and the difficulties of coordinating a shift in priorities just in one institution, let alone across a variety of them. Add, just as spice, the realization that information technology has arrived in the Red River Valley too, with the result that the nature of record keeping and the expectations of patrons are radically changing - we confirmed that records, in all forms and formats, were available in, to use the cliché, "a staggering abundance." All in all, as the project manager noted in a draft of his final report, "The opportunities for future work seem limitless."[27]

That prospect is not altogether inspiring. We have discovered some very daunting obstacles to making a documentation strategy work here. One implication is that implementing a strategy might be appropriate and feasible in situations where the entity in question is bounded by some definite frame (as in a high-technology company or a university, say), but is problematic when the entity is a geographic convenience encompassing a number of disparate record creating entities, ranging from a typical small farm to the local bank to the data warehouse of the regional office of the Department of Human Services. As well, with a more strictly defined entity, such as a university or a corporation, there is a relatively less complicated administrative problem - still a large number of records creators, but essentially only one organization responsible for records collection. As a result, a university or corporate archive is in a far better position to make decisions about resources and priorities that can be implemented on a consistent basis and as part of a routine program.[28]

Ultimately, the concern for practical considerations is going to lead to some recognition that the distinction between the macro and macro levels of analysis, and between the macro and micro documentation of a region, will perhaps tacitly dictate an allocation of responsibilities. That may be cold comfort to those looking for a concerted program and for active collaboration. But limits on resources make that prospect appear less promising and more like the horizon routinely faced by most all archives. There is just too much to do. In the face of that, when everyone's reach exceeds his grasp, institutions will use their missions to justify their choices. On the local level, county historical societies will not close up shop simply because, from the perspective of Washington or New York, they are all part of "flyover country." At the state and regional level, though, some consolidation of interests appears inevitable and some corresponding emphasis on representative rather than comprehensive documentation will follow. As a practical matter, then, local documentation is likely to be primarily a local responsibility;

accordingly, the question becomes how to sustain viable archival programs at the local level.

SHRABs in various states have taken different approaches to this situation. A number of re-grant programs have successfully provided funding and services to local societies. In the spring of 2000, the NHPRC, working with the Council of State Historic Records Coordinators (COSHRC), sponsored a conference on archival education that directly addressed the issue of helping local repositories and their staff to learn basic skills and technologies.[29] Efforts along these lines would directly answer the needs expressed in the archival focus group meeting held 24-25 July 2000. An ongoing framework for collaboration seemed to be the ideal: "Throughout discussions, the idea of a regional archival alliance kept resurfacing."[30] Whether a regional documentation strategy is the chicken or the egg in relation to such an alliance is an interesting question to ponder. In that context, analysis such as that done in this project might be in and of itself the most useful step, since it provided an essential educational opportunity; managed as an ongoing process, institutions can compare notes, discover mutually beneficial projects and find ways to work within the framework of a very high level conceptual understanding. That rising tide of awareness might lift all boats. But it might not, since the tide of records is rising irrespective of the quality of the boats and the expertise of the sailors within.

Conclusions

At the end of *Candide*, Voltaire's characters reflect upon the catastrophes they experienced as a result of all that thinking and planning. The eponymous hero repeats the book's most famous line, "Il faut cultiver notre jardin." But from one of his companions in misfortune comes a useful gloss: "Travaillons sans raisonner, dit Martin; c'est le seul moyen de rendre la vie supportable."[31] It is tempting advice and alert readers may detect an echo of it: we may not be able to articulate a documentation strategy, but we are going to develop our archives.

But there is something more to learn from this project. Benedict Anderson makes a point which has just been touched upon above: "In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."[32] Conceivably, what we have begun to document in this project are the styles in which communities are imagined. To a notable degree, our style is elegiac. We lament: history is being lost, a way of life is disappearing, communities are vanishing, our region and our culture are fundamentally changing.[33] That style presumes a whole set of values and perceptions that might be more important to document than the changes themselves. Right now, we are worrying the definitions of region, community or rural in the hope of fixing a set of structural features or criteria to guide our work - to echo Anderson, we are trying to find out what is false and what is real. At ground level, for the residents of the Red River Valley, that distinction is in many ways immaterial. To quote Joseph and Anthony Amato, "The presumption of actually being a place and having a culture allows residents … a way to take measure of who they are and what they value in a world often beyond their understanding and control."[34] The real challenge for

archivists could well be to document those presumptions, their enactment, their representation and their evolution.

There are two hints at how that might be done. Alessandro Portelli has written recently on studying oral history as memory, and then realizing memory's value as evidence, by accepting and analyzing the subjectivity that inevitably colors what people remember. He notes, "Oral sources tell us not just what people what did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did."[35] The focus groups we organized are a step in that direction. Amplified and elaborated in a comparative framework that contrasts people's stories with other sources, they could provide a wealth of documentation on how the residents of the Valley are structuring their view of their world.

With a specific focus on traditional forms of records, Elisabeth Kaplan has recently explored the relation of archives, historical societies and identity. She has particularly and compellingly urged archivists to become consciously aware of their role, since they "appraise, collect, and preserve the props with which notions of identity are built. In turn, notions of identity are confirmed and justified as historical documents validate their authority."[36] The documentation of the Red River Valley would be fascinating to examine in that light. Within the area's complex transit in the mind of European culture from frontier to settlement towards frontier again almost within the space of living memory, we have the opportunity to study the role of archives and records as representations of some of the more significant aspects of American identity. Kathyrn Dudley wrote, "Family farms have become our national icon of autonomy."[37] The documentation process is an important component of how that icon was created and how it is preserved. It well deserves our attention.

Endnotes

[1] Minnesota State Historical Records Advisory Board, *Documenting Agriculture and Rural Life. Proposal to the NHPRC* (May, 1999).
[2] Helen W. Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities*, (Chicago and Metuchen, N.J., 1992); Bruce Bruemmer and Sheldon Hochheiser, *The High-Technology Company: A Historical Research and Archival Guide* (Minneapolis, 1989); and Richard J. Cox, *Documenting Localities: A Practical Model for American Archivists and Manuscript Curators* (Lanham, MD and London, 1996).
[3] Maxine Kumin, "The ground beneath our feet," *New York Times*, 6 August 1995. http://www.nytimes.com Accessed 2/8/01
[4] David Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore, 1995), p. xi.
[5] Ben Leonard, Academic Focus Group: Meeting Summary 17-18 July 2000.
[6] Danbom, *Born in the Country,* p. 197 and p. 149.
[7] Timothy Egan, "Indians and Bison Returning to Plains Others Abandoned," *New York Times*, 27 May 2001, pp. A1 and A18.
[8] See, for example, Hiram Drache, *The Day of the Bonanza* (Fargo, 1964).
[9] *Documenting Agriculture and Rural Life. Proposal to the NHPRC*, p 1.
[10] Omer Bartov, "An Infinity of Suffering," *TLS,* 15 December 2000, p. 5.
[11] William Cronon*, Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991).
[12] Minnesota Historical Society, *Mill City Museum a Proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities*, February 2001, p.3. For more on the society's plans for the museum, visit <http://www.mnhs.org/events/saf/safdesign.html>.

[13] Kathryn Marie Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland* (Chicago, 2000), p. 6.
[14] Joseph A. Amato and Anthony Amato, "Minnesota, Real and Imagined: A View from the Countryside," *Daedalus*, 129 (2000), p. 55.
[15] And they may not even be all that different: Dudley argues persuasively that rural America does not constitute some isolated culture separate from "America." Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*, pp. 17 and 174. This is echoed in Danbom, p. 193.
[16] Stephanie Simon, "The Study of Us," *St. Paul Pioneer-Press*, 29 October 1999, p. 6A.
[17] A recent article about the decline of small dairy farms in Wisconsin points out some of the problems of the anecdotal approach by highlighting the debate among Wisconsin farmers about defining a farm in terms of size. A spokesman for the state's Farm Bureau said, "We've got people who have this locked-in perception of a farm and they don't want that changed." David Barboza, "America's Cheese State Fights to Stay That Way, " *New York Times*, 28 June 2001, pp. B1 and B8.
[18] As a possible counterpoint, consider an Iowa State project that indicates "former farmers have largely succeeded in building satisfying new lives and sound financial foundations." Dirk Johnson, "Leaving the Farm for the Other Real World," *New York Times*, 7 November 1999, The Nation, p. 3. One former farmer, now living in a city, said, "The kids would never want to go back now … The telephone never stops ringing."
[19] Ben Leonard, *Meetings Summary,* p. 2.
[20] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*, p. 41.
[21] Leonard, *Meetings Summary,* p. 2.
[22] David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: the Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York, 1996) p. 121.
[23] *ibid*., pp. 6-7.
[24] Cox, *Documenting Localities*, p. 79.
[25] Compare this report to the conclusions Richard Cox draws about the effort to develop a documentation strategy for western New York state. *ibid*., pp. 99-102.
[26] Samuels, *Varsity Letters*, pp. 14 and 15.
[27] Ben Leonard, *From Independence to Interdependence: Rural Perspectives on Change*, Final Report 26 April 2001, p. 28.
[28] This is, of course, all relative. No archive reliably has the resources and support to make this sort of thing work perfectly. But, in terms of documentation strategy, see the works of Helen Samuels and Bruce Bruemmer, cited above, as cases in point.
[29] For details on the National Forum for Archival Continuing Education, see the COSHRC web site, at <http://www.coshrc.org/nface/index.html>.
[30] Ben Leonard, *Archival Focus Group: Meeting Summary*, 24-25 July 2000, p. 1.
[31] Jean Francois Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Candide ou l'optimisme* . In the Everyman's Library edition, the translation reads, "We must take care of our garden" and "'Let's get down to work and stop all this philosophizing,' said Martin. 'It's the only way to make life bearable.'" *Candide and other Stories*, trans. Roger Pearson (New York, 1992).
[32] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 1983) p. 15.
[33] This took some interesting forms, For instance, in the Ada focus group meeting, there was an extraordinary outpouring of regret about the phenomenon of the disappearing local bank, largely expressed in terms of dismay over the impersonal nature of technology - e.g., the tradition of sitting down with a neighbor contrasted to the advent of voice mail. As my own childhood recollections of the community bank my family used are colored by the memory of the complex strategies my mother used to get a check cashed outside of the bank's 9-3, five days a week, work hours, the advent of ATMs, debit and credit cards, Internet banking and so on all seemed incredible boons.
[34] Joseph A. and Anthony Amato, "Minnesota, Real and Imagined," p. 74.
[35] Alexander Stille, "Prospecting for Truth in the Ore of Memory," *New York Times*, 10 March 2001, pp. A15 and A17.
[36] Elisabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," *American Archivist*, 63(2000), p. 126.
[37] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*, p. 7.

DOCUMENTING CHANGE IN AGRICULTURE AND RURAL LIFE: THE ARCHIVES OF THE AGRICULTURAL EXPERIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Michael Moosberger

Introduction

The development of agriculture in western Canada traces back to the mid 1800's and to two significant events; the decline of the fur trade in the Northwest Territories and the subsequent transfer of land holdings from the Hudson's Bay Company to the Government of Canada. As Canadian entrepreneurs observed the American expansion through the Great Plains of the United States during this period they saw the settlement of the Canadian Prairies as an opportunity to increase Canada's base of trade, business and economics as well as protect the region from any threat of U.S. expansionism. Over the next 100 years, agriculture became one of the most important components of the economies of the Canadian Prairie provinces, and remains so today[1].

Today, the changing nature of agriculture and agri-businesses is having a tremendous impact on traditional family farms and the small rural communities that exist to support them.[2] Urbanization and increasing farm size have placed family farms and small agricultural businesses in jeopardy, with many already having been driven out of business by larger competitors and declining market values. As these changes continue to accelerate, the need to document the history of this vanishing way of life is becoming far more pressing.

Indeed, some academics are now raising their voices in concern over the previous lack of research and historical writing done on Canadian agriculture. In an article on writing about rural life and agriculture, John Herd Thompson, a professor of history at Duke University and director of Duke's Canadian Studies Center observed that until very recently, historians have had little to say about Canada's rural past.[3]

Even before Thompson, other scholars had arrived at the same conclusion. In 1985, Professor Clay Gilson, then Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Manitoba spoke of the need for more research and scholarship in agricultural history. In a lecture given at the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections' Discovery Hour Series, Gilson stated:

> "We all know too little about our scientific accomplishments, our technological advances, the history of our farm organizations and our rural institutions. But we know even less about the people who were behind the accomplishments."[4]

Gilson went on to urge the Archives to take a leading role in filling the void and become a centre for archival collections and historical research relating to agriculture in Canada.[5]

To Gilson, having such an archival and research centre based at the University of Manitoba seemed quite logical as the University of Manitoba has been involved with agriculture for over 100 years. The history of the province as well, is in many ways also the history of agriculture. As such the development of the Archives of the Agricultural

Experience reflects the University's and the province's long and historic links to agriculture.

Having already seen for himself the potential of this area of archival acquisition, Dr Richard Bennett, head of the archives and Dr. Gilson began discussing ways for further developing the agricultural holdings of the archives. The department was already in possession of the records of the Faculty of Agriculture and a committee was struck to explore other available collections. By 1990, two significant agricultural organizations, Keystone Agricultural Producers and United Grain Growers had donated their archival records to the University. Distinguished faculty members like Dr. J.H. Ellis of Soil Science and Dr. Len Shebeski and Dr. Sol Sinclair of the Department of Agricultural Economics also added their papers to the Archives' holdings, providing a good foundation from which to develop the "Archives of the Agricultural Experience".

The Archives of the Agricultural Experience

Phase 1: The Red River Valley Survey

While the foundation for the Archives of the Agricultural Experience continued to grow, the acquisition of archival collections remained haphazard and without any particular focus. This changed in 1992 when a grant of $18,800 from the University of Manitoba's Research Development Fund, allowed the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections to launch a program to systematically identify and acquire valuable agricultural records. The initial phase of the project undertook to survey and acquire the private records of individuals and organizations involved in agriculture in the Red River Valley. The specific goals of the project were:

1) To identify and assess records relating to the history of agriculture and rural life in private hands in the Red River Valley.

2) To devise a strategy for the location and the eventual acquisition of these records by the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections.

3) To raise the profile of agricultural history, records preservation, and the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections in rural areas and in the agri-business sector.

To undertake the survey and research work a project team was assembled. This group included two students, Jill Mayer and Doug Panting who served as research associates and Gary Enns who was hired as an advisory consultant. All three had extensive background in agricultural history as well as significant connections to rural communities and to the agri-business sector.

In the project team's initial meetings, members shared their impressions of the current state of agricultural archival holdings in the province; defined the documentation process to be undertaken, and mapped out a research strategy for identifying collections and contacts within the agricultural community.[6]

The project team also discovered that while a number of Manitoba's archival repositories, besides the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, held agricultural records; the volume and comprehensiveness of these materials was extremely low in proportion to the importance of agriculture to the province. The team also determined that the initial focus of acquisition should concentrate on the records of farming families and prominent individuals and businesses in rural agricultural communities.

Concentration on these areas was chosen for several reasons. The acquisition of these types of records provided balance to the existing holdings of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience which had previously concentrated on the records of larger provincially based organizations and collections associated directly with the University of Manitoba. From the project team's initial research it was also discovered that many excellent collections of these types of records were still in private hands. But most importantly, was that these records were identified as being in the most immediate danger of being destroyed. During the survey process there were a number of occasions when the records being sought out by the project team had been either discarded or lost; as document holders were unaware of the value of the material in their possession.[7]

One of the project team's most useful research tools in developing the names of community contacts and for discovering potential collections were the local histories that had been produced by most communities in Manitoba. The names of the individuals on the local history book committees were the first people contacted within a community by the team. They in turn provided the project team with the names and contact information for people they had been in contact with and who had loaned them documents and photographs for inclusion in the local history publication. These people in turn provided the names of other individuals who they suggested the project team contact for other potential acquisitions. On the initial visit to each community, contact was also made with the local Department of Agriculture office, the municipal office, the local library and/or museum, all of who suggested further contacts and agreed to display information on the Archives' initiative. The result of these initial contacts and survey was a listing of over 100 names to be researched and contacted.

Relevant contact information about potential donors and additional information about the type and volume of records that they held is stored in a database created by the Archives and which remains active today. The database also provided the Archives with an indication of the donor's interest in donating their collection and, if they wished to retain the material for the present, whether they wanted to be contacted about a possible donation in future. This has allowed the Archives to keep in touch with potential donors over an extended period of time and has resulted in the acquisition of a number of collections long after the initial contact had been made with the donor.

The project teams' work also involved consulting other members of Manitoba's archival community to ensure that they were aware of the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections' new initiative and to ensure that the acquisition of agricultural records did not interfere with the ongoing activities of other archival repositories.

The story of agriculture in the Red River Valley inevitably involves the valley's large Mennonite and Franco-Manitoba populations. To be certain that the agricultural records being pursued by the University of Manitoba were not also of interest to the

archival repositories that document these ethnic groups, members of the project team and the Archives staff held discussions with representatives from both the Mennonite and francophone communities. The results of these discussions were extremely positive and allowed the project group to further refine their acquisition strategy. It was agreed that for Mennonite communities, records involving church leaders, prominent figures in the community or early Mennonite society would not be pursued and that the University Archives would consult with the Mennonite Heritage Centre and the Centre for Mennonite Bethren Studies about any records whose nature was unclear. It was also concluded in these meetings that the records of many modern Mennonite farm-related businesses were not actively being sought by the existing Mennonite archives because their primary focus was the religious aspects of Mennonite society and also because of limited space and budget considerations. Those involved in the discussions also felt that the acquisition and preservation of these records by the Archives of the Agricultural Experience might be warmly welcomed.[8] A meeting was also held with staff members of the Societe Historique du St. Boniface, the leading francophone archives in the province with a similar agreement being reached on consultation and cooperation.[9]

Another major issue that faced the Archives of the Agricultural Experience from its inception was the need to publicize itself and at the same time allay the concerns of many individuals in the rural community that this was just another example of a large Winnipeg-based institution coming into rural Manitoba to take what it wanted with no support or commitment back to the community.

One of the first steps in the Archives' public relations campaign involved the production of a brochure outlining the activities of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience. Within its pages photographs were used to help explain why this work was being undertaken; what type of materials were being sought, and the benefits that a donation would provide. The Archives also secured the support of the Centennial Farms Program of the provincial Department of Agriculture. The Program wrote letters with an accompanying copy of the brochure to each of the centennial farms in the survey area outlining the program and its benefits.

A large part of the public relations campaign also involved securing media attention. Press releases were prepared by the University's Public Relations Office and distributed, with the Archives brochure, by the Faculty of Agriculture Press Office. Visits to local rural newspapers and interviews on local radio stations followed. Articles about the Archives of the Agricultural Experience appeared in the Manitoba Co-operator and Red River Valley Echo.[10]

The Red River Valley survey yielded substantial results and confirmed both the necessity and importance of the project. The first phase of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience identified or secured over 50 individual family farm records and small agri-business collections including journals, diaries, photographs, and financial records. These records are particularly important as the changes in agriculture are signaling the demise of the family farm, which was for over a century, the mainstay of the agricultural sector. Many of the family farm collections acquired were in the hands of individuals who had already left farming and the project's timely intervention saved at least some of these collections from being lost or discarded.

Phase 2: Business and Corporate Records

Phase two of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience began in the fall of 1993. The Archives expanded the scope of the project to include agri-business and corporate records. In the course of work on the first phase of the project, it became evident that much of the corporate record remained unsecured and at risk of being discarded. This risk was especially great in today's age of mergers and corporate change. Phase two concentrated much of its effort on the identification of situations in which corporate change or business closures threatened the continued existence of historical corporate records. As a result, the records of the Union Stock Yards, a one-time subsidiary of the Canadian Pacific Railway, were acquired by the Archives of the Agricultural Experience. Other collections acquired included the historic records of CanAmera Foods, a canola crushing and oil production company following the purchase of CSP Foods and its Altona operations; the Archives of Ogilvie Flour Mills Ltd., Canada's oldest grain company, after it was purchased by Archer Daniels Midland Co., and additional Ogilvie material donated by John Labatt Ltd., another of Ogilvie's former owners, as well as the Archives of the Winnipeg Commodity Clearing Association. The Archives also acquired the records of The North-West Line Elevator Association, which had been donated to the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, but who, in a show of support for the Archives of the Agricultural Experience convinced the donor to withdraw the donation and transfer the collection to the University of Manitoba. The Archives also acquired the only surviving records of the first Canadian Wheat Board, which operated from 1917 to 1921.

Phase two also identified a number of collections for agri-businesses and organizations that continue to be thriving enterprises but which did not have the resources or the commitment to manage and make accessible their archival records. Through negotiations, many of these businesses and organizations also contribute their archival collections to the Archives of the Agricultural Experience on a regular basis. Included in these collections are additional and regular accruals from the United Grain Growers Inc., the records of the Manitoba Farm Bureau and records from the Winnipeg Commodity Exchange and the Manitoba Cattle Producers Association.

The third phase of the project began in 1995 and focused on the Assiniboine River Valley. This resulted in the acquisition of the Dauphin Agricultural Society Collection along with a number of additional farm family collections.

Entrenching the Archives of the Agricultural Experience

With the first three phases of the project completed, the initial funding expended and the project team members having left to pursue other career opportunities, the Archives of the Agricultural Experience faced an uncertain future. The project had already determined that the extent of the agricultural record remaining unsecured and inaccessible was much greater than originally realized and that the existing financial, human and physical resources available to the Archives were totally inadequate to deal with the existing collections. The Archives had acquired a tremendous archival resource but how would it be made accessible and how would the Archives meet the ongoing

expectations from potential farm, business and corporate donors? These were questions that remained unanswered.

Before any additional project-based activities were undertaken in support of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience it was determined that additional planning would be required to identify the outstanding issues and new opportunities that would be critical to the success of the program. It was also agreed that firmly entrenching the Archives of the Agricultural Experience as a major component of the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections' overall acquisition mandate and program was an important first step. In 1997, the staff of the University Archives prepared and had formally approved by the University of Manitoba a formal mission statement and objectives for the Archives of the Agricultural Experience.

Mission Statement of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience

The mission of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience is the identification, acquisition, preservation, and interpretation of western Canada's agricultural and rural record.

Objectives of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience

To establish a collection rich in the documents of Canadian agriculture.
To preserve and protect this rich agricultural heritage.
To ensure accessibility to the agricultural record for historical research purposes.
To identify sufficient resources to create and maintain a representative collection.
To build a profile for the Archives of the Agricultural Experience to ensure its use.

With an approved mission statement and objectives in hand, the Archives undertook a strategic planning exercise in early 1998 to identify and priorize the activities of the program. The four areas identified as requiring work, not surprisingly relate directly to the overall objectives of the program. They include intellectual control, preservation and access to the archival holdings; funding; communications and public relations; and future acquisitions.[11]

Intellectual control, access and preservation

The early success of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience left the University Archives with a large backlog of unprocessed collections. The value of these collections would be reduced significantly if the Archives could not make them accessible in a timely fashion. It was also critical to the ongoing reputation of the agricultural archives' program that the communities from where these collections came, have some type of access to them, as promised them in almost every community meeting held and almost every piece of public relations material. It was also a strong argument that was made with donors when the collections were acquired by the University and removed to Winnipeg.

A major part of the solution to these problems came in the form of the Province of Manitoba's provincial information highway initiative. This program, launched in 1995-

1996, provided for the establishment of Internet access in every community in the province through the rural library system. The University Archives' staff determined that if they could use the World Wide Web to provide access to the agricultural archives holdings, they could, at least at a collection level, provide rural communities with access to the collections that they had surrendered.

Plans were developed to create an Archives of the Agricultural Experience web page, which would feature the collections-level descriptions of those materials acquired in the past eight years and also to include digitized images as samples of the types of information a user might find within these collections. The web pages could also be upgraded in future with finding aids for the collections and additional digitized images as time and resources permitted. At the same time, work on processing the large backlog of agricultural collections began in earnest. No one area of acquisition was given priority over another as access to as broad-based a collection of descriptive entries covering as many regions and as many aspects of agricultural life as possible, was seen as the primary goal of the first stage of the agricultural archives web page. The intent was to "whet" the interest of as large a group of users as possible and then build on this initial work with the additional support and encouragement of these initial users.

By the launch of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience web page in the summer of 1999, over 47 different collections had been processed and descriptive entries added to the web page. These collections are divided into one of five categories on the web page; The Family Farm; Farm Women, Agricultural Associations and Societies; Agricultural and the University of Manitoba; Agricultural Publications; and the Agri.-Food Industry.

The URL for the web page is:

http://www.umanitoba.ca/academic_support/libraries/units/archives/agric_exper/index.html

The acquisition and archival processing of these agricultural collections also placed a considerable strain on the Archives' storage capacity. While unprocessed material was held in off-site storage leased from the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, the storage space available for the Archives' processed collections on the University's Fort Garry campus, was nearing capacity. With the completion of the University of Manitoba Libraries' new Icelandic Collection Reading Room in the fall of 2000, the Archives was able to acquire an additional 4100 square feet of storage space adjacent to its existing facilities on the 3rd floor of the Elizabeth Dafoe Library. This space will be used to house newly processed materials, as well as records that will be coming back to the Archives from off-site storage and for additional new acquisitions. While by no means a long-term solution to the Archives growing space needs, it has provided the Archives with breathing space for the next few years.

Funding

Funding for the Archives of the Agricultural Experience has been a critical component of the program since its early development. It is certain that without the $18,800 grant received from the University of Manitoba, the Archives would not have achieved the early successes that it did. This initial funding, however, only 'primed the

pump' and the need for funding to support the archival processing of the collections and for providing access to them was always an ongoing priority.

A number of fundraising activities helped to maintain the Archives of the Agricultural Experience from 1993 to 1999. While the Archives had received a considerable number of collections from individual donors, most of these people could not provide any financial support to the Archives. The focus of the fundraising activities therefore concentrated on those donors who did have the resources to support the program, namely, those agri-businesses who had donated their organizational records to the Archives. As part of their donation, the corporate donor was offered a charitable tax receipt by the University for the fair market value of their collection, as determined by a group of independent appraisers. Once this valuation had been completed and a monetary value determined the Archives would ask the corporate donor to make a cash donation, usually the equivalent amount of the fair market value of the collection, to the Archives to support the archival processing of their collection and other activities associated with the Archives of the Agricultural Experience. The corporate donor would thereby receive two tax receipts from the University while the Archives received both the donor's archival collection as well as financial support to preserve and make it accessible. While not successful with every donor, the strategy did provide the Archives with a steady stream of funds from a number of regular contributors.

The Archives also solicited donations and support from sources that could not take advantage of Canadian charitable status, and yet who were still willing to support the program's goals and objectives. One of the largest and most unexpected donations came from Dwayne Andreas, Chairman of Archer-Daniels-Midland Co. (ADM) of Decatur, Illnois. With the acquisition of the Ogilvie Flour Mills in 1995 from ADM Milling, a subsidiary of ADM, the Head of the Archives at that time, Dr. Richard Bennett wrote to Mr. Andreas informing him of the Archives' recent acquisition and enquiring whether ADM had any interest in supporting the Archives' efforts to preserve and make the collection accessible. Without seeing any formal proposal or budget, Mr. Andreas responded within several weeks with a check for $US 5,000 and a promise of an additional $US 10,000 over the following two years. With the currency exchange differential this donation grew to almost $CDN 30,000 and provided a base of funding support which allowed the Archives to pursue matching grant funding from the Province of Manitoba's Heritage Grants Advisory Council and the Canadian Council of Archives' Control of Holdings Grant Program. The publicity generated by the Archives outlining Mr. Andreas' donation also triggered interest and an offer of assistance from Manitoba's largest public foundation.

The Winnipeg Foundation has been serving the citizens of Winnipeg since 1921 and has developed a most distinguished record as a philanthropic supporter of a wide range of community projects and causes. In 1996, the Foundation approached the Archives and asked if it would consider submitting an grant application to the Foundation to support the Archives of the Agricultural Experience. A funding proposal for $25,000 was prepared and outlined a number of initiatives to be undertaken including the archival processing of a number of large agri-business collections and the completion of the Archives' agricultural web page. The application was approved for the full amount requested and by the fall of 1997, the Archives of the Agricultural Experience had over $50,000 either in its account or committed to it. This base of funding supported the

activities of the Archives for over two years until the summer of 1999 when final work on the Archives' agricultural web page was completed.[12]

Since 1999, funding for the Archives of the Agricultural Experience has virtually disappeared. The need to revitalize the Archives' fundraising activities and develop new sources of funding remains crucial to the development of new program initiatives and to its very survival. These fund raising strategies must identify long-term goals that reflect the long-term potential of this program. The Archives of the Agricultural Experience has the potential of becoming a significant facility and resource to the academic as well as the agricultural communities in Canada, but stable, long-term funding must be found to achieve this goal.

Short term fund-raising strategies must focus on generating sufficient resources to maintain the momentum built by the program over the last decade. These strategies should be linked to the corporations, organizations, and individuals whose records are or will be a part of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience. Long-term funding for capital and operating must be coordinated within the campaigns of the University of Manitoba, which must be made aware of the value and benefits of this program for teaching and research within the university as well as for the overall reputation of the University as community leader in the province.

There has been some positive news for increased funding for the Archives. In 2000, the Archives received approval from the University's Vice-President (Administration) to begin planning for its own fundraising campaign to support the renovation of the Archives' 3rd floor space and to endow its major areas of acquisition including the Archives of the Agricultural Experience. An initial target of $750,000 has been set with completion of the fundraising campaign in 2003.

Communication and Public Relations

From its outset, the Archives of the Agricultural Experience spent considerable time and effort on communicating and promoting its objectives within the agricultural community. A brochure, press releases, and articles in rural weeklies and in farming publications all emphasized the importance of the project and the need to preserve the history of agriculture in the province. Initial contact people become advocates for the program and a number of these individuals along with a number of interested academic and agri-business leaders served on the program's advisory board, which provided invaluable insight and direction for the first two phases of the program. While this advisory council has not met in many years, the idea of reconstituting the group with new members and with well-defined roles and responsibilities has been recently considered. Such an advisory council could be invaluable once again in promoting the agricultural archives program , as well as "opening doors" to support any resources that the Archives might not normally have access to or have even considered.

Maintaining a steady stream of information about the Archives of the Agricultural Experience into the community also remains an ongoing challenge for the program. To retain its visibility in the agricultural community, the Archives have used every opportunity to publicize the program. When the Agricultural Archives web site was launched in 1999, the official unveiling took place in the corporate headquarters of the United Grain Growers Inc. in downtown Winnipeg, rather than at the University. Every

donor and all of those individuals and organizations that had provided support to the program received invitations. Publicity was generated by both the University and UGG, resulting in a number of articles appearing in the local press and in farming publications. Requests from the local Canadian Broadcasting Corporation station for radio interviews about the Agricultural Archives were also received and at least one of the interviews was picked up and rebroadcast nationally.

Since the launch of the web page, publicity for the program has waned, primarily due to the lack of resources and to staffing changes. It remains, however, as important a part of the program's objectives, as it has been in the past. Indeed the largest portion of the Agricultural Archives Strategic Planning document deals with issues related to communications and public relations, including the need to develop partnerships with other agricultural groups, promoting new acquisitions, and developing activities to stimulate interest and research activity around the program[13].

Future Acquisitions

The Archives of the Agricultural Experience is continuing to develop a reputation as one of the premiere agricultural archives in Canada and is beginning to be recognized by scholars and researchers as one of the best resources for agricultural records.

However, researchers have begun to request records that have not yet been acquired. These include the records of many prairie agricultural sectors that remain undocumented. In its acquisitions to date, the Archives have focused on the family farm and agri-businesses and organizations primarily involved with the grain trade. But agriculture and agricultural society is comprised of many other components. Collections from these other sectors also need to be considered for future acquisition. It is important that the Archives look at broadening its acquisition focus and consider acquiring the records of a rural general store and other rural businesses, a farm implement company, a seed manufacturer, a livestock producer and many other agriculture based sectors, areas in which the Archives has few or no records. These new collections will not only provide the Archives with a more comprehensive roster of holdings, they will continue to fill the gaps that exist in its documenting of rural and agricultural life.

While concentrating its efforts on acquisitions in other agricultural sectors the groups that formed the foundation of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience should not be ignored or forgotten. The Archives needs to recognize the inter-connectedness of all of these groups. Success in acquiring the records of a farmer can lead to a referral to a corporation or an organization. These linkages must be recognized, understood, and used to develop contacts within each group. The Archives should explore ways of augmenting the documentation it has already acquired in its established areas of acquisition. The use of oral histories, especially in support of family farm records, which are often incomplete, could be a tremendous resource to researchers in understanding the rapid decline of this component of agricultural society.

The reconstituting of the Archives' Advisory Council could also be of great assistance identifying potential new collections, especially if the Council membership was made up of a broad cross section of the agricultural community. However, the reality of any new acquisition initiatives is still tied to the need for stable, long term funding for the Archives. Without this funding, the acquisition of new collections and

the augmenting of existing agricultural documentation within the Archives of the Agricultural Experience remain in serious doubt.

Conclusion

The success of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience program demonstrates the richness of the prairie agricultural record and the viability of and the need for an agricultural archival collection. It also demonstrates the need and interest in establishing and maintaining such a resource.

Since its creation in the early 1990's, the Archives of the Agricultural Experience has received a variety and wealth of materials documenting many aspects of the economic, social, political and cultural role that agricultural has played in the history of Manitoba and the rest of Canada. It has made a substantial amount of these collections available for research use and has provided access to the communities from where they originated. It continues to publicize its agricultural holdings and encourages their use among academics and the general public. But with all that it has accomplished the Archives of the Agricultural Experience sees so much more that can and must be done. Its modest beginnings have been outstripped by the enthusiastic support of individual and corporate project participants. The continued success of this program will depend on its ability to maintain its momentum at a time when financial and human resources are at a minimum.

Endnotes

[1] Between 1995 and 1999 agriculture and related industries in Manitoba contributed an average of 11.0 per cent to the provincial Gross Domestic Product.

[2] In Manitoba the number of family farms has decreased in number from 25,602 in 1991 to 23,400 in 1999 while the average size of Manitoba farms has risen by approximately 65 acres during the same period.

[3] John Herd Thompson. "Writing bout Rural Life and Agriculture." Writing about Canada. Ed. John Schultz, (Scarborough, 1990) p.97

[4] J.C. Gilson "Time to recognize our Heroes", Prepared as a special lecture for the University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, University of Manitoba, 17 April 1985. P.4

[5]Ibid. p.7

[6] The team's initial activities were guided by an article written by Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewitt entitled "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and Case Study", American Archivist, Volume 50, Winter 1987. pp.12-47.

[7] "A Harvest of Records: Archives of the Agricultural Experience, Phase I Project Report" p.4.

[8] Interviews with Peter Rempel, Winnipeg, 26 February 1993 and Delbert Plett, Steinbach, 19 March 1993.

[9] This process has continued for other phases of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience. When undertaking survey and acquisitions work of a similar nature related to agriculture in the Assiniboine River Valley the University of Manitoba Archives consulted with both the Brandon University Archives, which

holds a number of agricultural collections, most significantly the Manitoba Pool Elevators and Mackenzie Seed companies, and the Carberry Plains Archives, which documents all aspects of the Town of Carberry and its surrounding area. The result of these consultations has focused the Archives of the Agricultural Experience on the area of the Assiniboine Valley only as far as the City of Portage La Prairie and has left the remainder of the region to be documented by these other archival repositories.

[10] Manitoba Co-operator, 21 January 1993; and Red River Valley Echo, 12 February 1993.

[11] Archives of the Agricultural Experience – Strategic Planning Proposal., 1998. P.2.

[12] This period also marked a major change in the Archives' staff as Dr. Bennett, the founder of the Archives of the Agricultural Experience left as Head of the Archives in September 1997 after 18 years. His successor, Shelley Sweeney did not join the Archives until September 1998, leaving the Archives short-staffed for a year.

[13] Archives of the Agricultural Experience – Strategic Planning Proposal., 1998. pp. 5-7